

Social climbers at Herculaneum

Alison Cooley

Figures like Petronius' Trimalchio are larger than life and seduce us into thinking that we know what Roman freedmen looked like. Here Alison Cooley paints a refreshingly different picture of what slaves did after manumission.

Ian Repath's piece has already introduced us to the fictional Trimalchio and his hellish dinner-party. The ex-slave flaunts his wealth in increasingly vulgar ways which break the rules of polite society. The description of his arrival at the dinner sets the tone: even his napkin bore a broad purple stripe, copying the stripe that usually distinguished a senator's tunic.

'Trimalchio was conducted in to the sound of music, propped on the tiniest of pillows. A laugh escaped the unwary. His head was shaven and peered out of a scarlet cloak, and over the heavy clothes on his neck he had put on a napkin with a broad stripe and fringes hanging from it all round.'

His behaviour at the dinner is equally embarrassing. Given that Petronius, the author of the *Satyricon*, was a member of Rome's elite, it is unsurprising to find him being rude about new money.

Imperial freedmen at the court of Claudius received similarly unflattering treatment at the hands of senatorial historian Tacitus – not least because their ascendance reflected badly on the emperor. In elite eyes, freedmen could never escape their servile origins. But to what extent was this elite view shared? To what extent was it grounded in reality? Petronius' *Satyricon* is set on the Bay of Naples, probably in the harbour-town of Puteoli, just a few miles around the bay from the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In contrast to its prejudice, in Herculaneum in particular we gain a far more positive picture of the social promotion and subsequent integration of freedmen and freedwomen.

Lucius Venidius Ennychus of Herculaneum

An archive of 39 wax tablets found in a basket on an upper floor of the House of the Black Saloon at Herculaneum allows

us to be more objective. These tablets pertain to one man, Lucius Venidius Ennychus, and date to between A.D. 40/1 and 31st December A.D. 66. Some of them give unusual insights into the way in which social mobility could successfully operate. Originally a slave, Ennychus received his freedom some time before A.D. 40, but did not qualify for full Roman citizenship.

Augustus' legislation of A.D. 4, designed to guarantee the quality of new citizens, had specified that if a master were to free a slave before he had reached the age of 20, or if the slave himself had not reached the age of 30, then the slave would only be awarded the lesser status known as Junian Latin status, rather than that of Roman citizen. This lesser status meant that though such individuals were no longer slaves, they could not make wills nor receive bequests from others. It was, however, possible for a Junian Latin to be granted full citizenship if he had a child who survived to its first birthday. This regulation was one of Augustus' measures designed to encourage childbirth.

These measures explain why it was that Lucius Venidius Ennychus kept an archive: its documents enabled him to prove his legal status. And they are still invaluable today, giving us a unique glimpse of how he secured full citizenship. The first tablet is a birth declaration:

'In the consulship of Gaius Velleius Paterculus and Marcus Manilius Vopiscus {A.D. 60}, on 24th July, Lucius Venidius Ennychus has solemnly declared that a daughter has been born to him by his wife Livia Acte. Transacted at Herculaneum.'

This is no mere announcement by a proud father. It has a more practical function: once a child reached its first birthday, its parents could claim full citizenship. And indeed the next document is a decree by the town council of Herculaneum support-

ing Ennychus' application for full citizenship a year later, on 25th July A.D. 61. A further wax tablet contains a copy of an official edict posted up at Rome. A deputation of town councillors had to travel up to Rome from Herculaneum in order to have Ennychus' new status ratified by none other than the urban praetor, and it is an authenticated copy of his decree which Ennychus carefully preserved in his personal archive:

'Copied and checked from the edict of Lucius Servenius Gallus, praetor, which had been posted up at Rome in the forum of Augustus under the Julian portico next to column {number missing} in front of his platform, in which had been written that which is written below: Lucius Servenius Gallus, praetor, declares: Marcus Ofellius Magnus and Tiberius Crassius Firmus chief magistrates and {name missing} and Marcus Nonius Celsinus have reported to me a decree in which the town councillors of Herculaneum in accordance with the lex Aelia Sentia had sanctioned the case of Lucius Venidius Ennychus and of Livia Acte on the grounds that they had a one-year-old daughter born from them at Herculaneum as a result of their lawful marriage, and so since the case in question has been confirmed, I approve that they are Roman citizens. Transacted on 22nd March, in the consulship of Publius Marius and Lucius Afinius Gallus.'

The edict dates to 22nd March A.D. 62, showing commendable speed in completing the whole process. If only modern bureaucratic systems worked as efficiently! The final tablet in the archive of A.D. 66 shows Ennychus being made the legal guardian for a woman, an appointment which underlines his acceptance into citizen society. Further documents reveal that he held the rank of Augustalis, another marker of status just below that of a town councillor.

A freedwoman civic benefactor

It was not just freedmen who could

achieve such standing in the community. One of the most recently excavated parts of Herculaneum provides fresh evidence for the role that a freedwoman might play in civic life. Down above the harbour-front, a temple has recently been uncovered, which was dedicated to Venus. Originally constructed in the second century B.C., the temple was modified in the Augustan period, and then repaired during the early Flavian period, just a few years before being destroyed in the eruption. This temple has two monumental building-inscriptions which tell us the interesting background to this last building-phase. These inscriptions were found shattered into pieces on the beach-front, hurled there, no doubt, by the pyroclastic surges.

The first of these inscriptions states:

'Vibidia Saturnina and Aulus Furius Saturninus, at the dedication of the portrait-busts of the Caesars and of the temple of Venus, gave to the town councillors and Augustales 20 sesterces each and to the townsfolk [8?] sesterces, and to the worshippers of Venus 4 sesterces.'

The second gives more information about their status, with Vibidia Saturnina being described in an unparalleled way as 'freedwoman of a girl'. It seems that she was elected priestess, presumably of Venus, whilst Aulus Furius Saturninus, who was probably her son, received some sort of municipal honours. The second inscription also reveals that their investment went beyond restoring this temple, stating that they also contributed money towards repairing the Capitolium.

An honest freedman

At Herculaneum, then, we gain a positive image of the social integration and public roles played by freedmen and freedwomen in the first century A.D. – an image that contrasts strikingly with the negative picture of freedmen that emerges from literary sources. That these more positive feelings may have been more pervasive than the negative emerges from another newly published inscription, this time from the southern Italian city of Copia Thurii, on the south-east coast of Italy. A decree passed by the local town councillors praises a freedman named Tiberius Claudius Idomeneus, bestowing upon him the rank of *Augustalis*. The decree recognised Idomeneus' probity in administering public finances, and set him up as an example for imitation by others. Most unexpectedly, it specifically mentions his period of service first as a slave, and then praises him for his continuing commitment after his manumission. The town council seems to feel no embarrassment in

acknowledging his servile origins.

However amusing and memorable Trimalchio and friends are, it is fortunate for Roman freedmen and -women that alternative types of evidence survive. These paint a far rosier picture of life after manumission and show how many former slaves gained respect even among the local elites of Italian towns, even if not among the elite of Rome.

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